

Lent 4 A March 2, 2008: Wesley 9 & 10.30am I Samuel 16. 1-13 & John 9. 1-41 Rev Peter Walker

Here is the story of a palace coup! Well, kind of; it involves intrigue, the rise and fall of kings, and three stand-out characters in Israel's early history. And, deep down, it's actually a story about leaders, and what we should look for in them (and in everyone - including ourselves).

First Samuel recounts the time when Israel first decided it wanted a king. It has three sections, which are built around the fortunes of three characters: Samuel the last of Israel's judges (ch 1-7), Saul, Israel's first king (ch 8-15) and David, Israel's second and greatest king (ch 16-31).

Samuel is a pivotal figure in the whole drama. He is the last of the judges (as I mentioned); the last of the leaders of Israel before the time of the kings. It is Samuel who anoints Saul as Israel's first king and who later announces Saul's rejection by God and his replacement by David. Samuel is, if you like, the real king-maker in the story.

The second character, Saul, is a pretty tragic figure, actually. He is plucked from obscurity because the people are longing for a powerful 'figure-head' so that they can 'be like the other nations'. But Saul is thrust into a position of power which ultimately over-powers him. He becomes unhinged, for want of a better word; caught in a sandwich between the machinations of God's spokesman, Samuel the king-maker, and the emerging, charismatic young giant killer - David.

David, the 3rd character, is the real focus of First Samuel. He is undoubtedly the hero of his times. We will come back to David.

1st and 2nd Samuel are one part of an even larger, single composition. (the 'Deuteronomistic History') It encompasses the books of Joshua, Judges, 1-2 Samuel and 1-2 Kings. They tell the history of Israel from the time of Joshua's conquest of 'the promised land' (c. 1200 BC) through to the collapse of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah (c. 720 BC). It is one of the great works of ancient history! It is important to note that this is a theological history. In other words, it sets out to tell the story of Israel's relationship with the Lord. And therefore it evaluates Israel's fortunes - both good and bad - and it's leading figures like Samuel, Saul and David, in terms of their obedience and faithfulness to God. And so it is not what we would call 'history' by today's standards.

A simple example. David's long reign is attributed to his faithfulness to God's law. Now we know, actually, that military factors in the ancient middle east were the cause of his long reign (ie) the lack of a strong enemy. So that is just worth noting. This history is written to shine a light on Israel's relationship with God and so some relevant 'history' is left in the shadows. Fair enough. It is just good to know what we are reading. Also, I like the way this history of Israel's relationship to God comes to us 'warts and all'. If faithfulness to God's law was seen as very important it is also the case that David's occasional adventures into unfaithfulness, for example, are not left out. (Bathsheba and the strategic disposal of her husband Uriah) I might add that, by ancient standards, king David was in fact a moderate. His son and successor Solomon, for example, had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines!

But let's get back to the story...

Having been made 1st king of Israel, Saul proved himself an outstanding general, knocking over the Moabites, Ammorites, Edomites and Amalekites. 'Whichever way he turned', we read, 'he was victorious'.

But, Saul disobeyed Yahweh, first by offering a sacrifice in Samuel's absence and then by sparing the Amalekite king. And - worse - he decided to spare the most precious of the defeated king's treasures. Generosity like that at the close of battle was not viewed favourably!

So Saul had entered the slippery slope, and a palace coup is in the offing. I say that because these reasons for Saul's disfavour with God seem fairly questionable. Here is what he has done - Saul has presumed to commune directly with God (without the mediation of a priest / judge - Samuel) and he has shown generosity to a foe. He sounds to me like a Protestant! (for the first rather more so than the second reason)

So most scholars think there lies behind them a tug-of-war between Samuel and Saul over who really holds the reigns, in Israel, among the people of God. Samuel had only very reluctantly agreed to the people's demand that they have a king. We all know that those who have held authority for a long time usually find it a hard thing to hand over. It happens in the Church and in all manner of organisations. Here we may have something of an insight into the character of Samuel and the nature of his dispute with Saul.

That brings us to the point where we join the story in today's passage. God says to Samuel, 'I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem, for I have found myself a [new] king from among his sons'.

What follows all takes place in secret. All of Jesse's sons are inspected, and Samuel is told by God to choose the last and the least likely, the shepherd boy, David. Samuel dutifully took the horn of oil and anointed David, just as the Lord had instructed him, and we are told that 'the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward.'

Somehow knowing that he has lost the Lord's favour, Saul descends by degrees into a kind of madness. He calls for a musician to assuage his troubled spirit, and the musician drafted for this assignment is non other than David. Whenever Saul's spirit was broken David would be called to play his harp and sing his songs for the troubled king. David's music is completely lost to us now, but his lyrics are collected in the book of Psalms. We can no longer be certain which were originally his and which were attributed to him over subsequent centuries, but the most famous of the Psalms given to David's name is, of course, the twenty-third. It has been called the most famous prayer in the world. (Though the Lord's Prayer would surely give it a run for the money)

Within a short time, Saul came to have a kind of obsession with the harp-playing and singing David. David had become a charismatic figure among the people of influence, not only because of his music, but his reputation was given a big shot in the arm following his remarkable victory over Goliath. David is one of those figures we all find a little bit much: he can sing, and play an instrument, he's clever and he can defeat giants! It is no wonder that king Saul became jealous.

Ultimately, Saul's jealousy and his determination to get rid of David fail. Saul and his son Jonathon are both killed in a battle between the Israelites and the Philistines. At thirty years of age, David is consecrated as king.

Amidst all these machinations of jealousy and politics, there is a portion of the story about David's selection by Samuel that shouldn't be missed; a note that is struck that seems the most important of all.

When Samuel heads out to Bethlehem to inspect Jesse's sons the first boy to be displayed must have been strong and 'kingly' and so Samuel says: "Surely the Lord's anointed is now before me". Yet he pauses, hearing God's leading in another way. Verse seven has it like this: "But the Lord said to Samuel, 'Do not look upon the appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks upon the heart.'" And so David is chosen.

What we may understand to be happening here is that Israel is learning how to see: beginning to see what leadership must mean among the people of God; what leads to true authority, what gifts are most important, what characteristics are most needed. They are learning what to look for in leaders - learning how to see what is in the heart. Learning that they must look upon others as God looks upon them.

This issue of how one sees is central to this story. Do we see as God sees - looking upon the heart? Or do we make our judgements based on the superficial?

This is also important in the Gospel story of Jesus healing the man born blind. By the end of that story, all those who had been blind, namely the young man, are able to see. But those who have the sight of their eyes, are still blind because they cannot see to, or with, the heart. By the end of the drama, the one who was blind, having encountered the grace of God in Jesus Christ, truly sees. Others, like the neighbours and the Pharisees, are as blind as they ever were.

Israel wanted a king "to be like the other nations". God is worried. They have begun to view things the wrong way. The wrong eyes. This will not make you a light to the nations. There is another way. But they will not be persuaded.

It draws our minds forward, again, to Jesus. You know that among the Gentiles their rulers lord it over them, he once said to his disciples. Yet it must not be so among you. Whoever among you wishes to be first must be last and whoever wishes to be greatest must be a servant. Or, to use the images of David's Psalm, be like the shepherd-Lord, who leads and protects and comforts others.

Let that be the model for leadership of the people of God - and the model whereby we view each other. Let us see with the eyes of the heart. Let us see, as if seeing with the eyes of God.